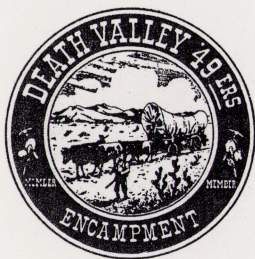


RALPH PALMER MERRITT

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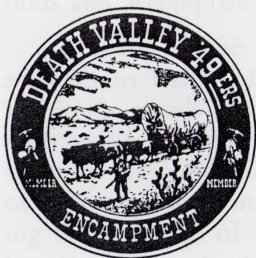


By ARDIS M. WALKER



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Cudis M. Walker

INLAND PRINTING AND ENGRAVING COMPANY
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NOVEMBER, 1964



Ralph Palmer Merritt

1883 — 1963

Encampment Dedication

DEATH VALLEY MUSEUM AND VISITORS CENTER

2:30 P.M., Nov. 6, 1964

Program

INTRODUCTION ARTHUR W. WALKER
President Death Valley 49ers

PROGRAM CHAIRMAN ARDIS M. WALKER
Past President Death Valley 49ers

"MEN ARE DUST" J. E. MORHARDT
Director Death Valley 49ers

THE STOUT HEART.....L. BURR BELDEN
Past President Death Valley 49ers

DEATH VALLEY CHAPTER MRS. WILLARD LEWIS
Past President Death Valley 49ers

MY FRIEND, A EULOGY HORACE M. ALBRIGHT
Past Director National Park Service

"LAST BONANZA" JOHN W. HILTON
Director Death Valley 49ers

CLOSING ARTHUR W. WALKER

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On this as on many other projects he worked at his own expense, giving of his creative thought and energy with the same enthusiasm that marked him as a 'rice czar' or a food administrator. In fact it would seem that his material rewards came only as by-products of his consuming interest in public service.

True to the general pattern of his life, he was called upon to fill a difficult and important assignment when the tragedy of Pearl Harbor suddenly exploded across the American scene. Here his unique genius was called into place to cope, once more, with vital social and political problems of his time. On this occasion he accepted the burdensome and exacting duties of project director of the War Relocation Authority at Manzanar, California. Later, at the annual banquet of the Museum Association of Eastern California held at Bishop on April 23, 1948, he modestly summarized the project as follows, "Under the War Relocation Authority a peaceful, cooperative war-time community was created at Manzanar with its system of schools, hospitals, agriculture, manufacturing and civil government. While the total number of evacuees was greater than the entire population of Inyo County at that time, their presence added no burden to the people of the community in costs or civil disturbance and their living at Manzanar developed deeper and clearer understanding by the evacuees of the ideals of America and returned them at the end of the war to their homes as better citizens than they might have been without the experience of Manzanar."

Here he did not mention his courageous stand against the 'get tough' policy of some of his military advisors nor the fanatic pressures he had to resist from hysterical citizens. He did not recall the tragic rioting of a displayed and dispossessed minority of Japanese-Americans until later. This he did when called upon to give eloquent credit to Margaret Gleason who had served courageously by his side at Manzanar as his director of welfare. Then it was that he told the following story:

"On Dec. 7, 1942, the turbulent forces that had been at work broke into a mass riot like a thunderstorm over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It was a tragic affair—no one person was to blame. There was no one cause, but many grievances of many kinds created uncontrollable mass emotions. Late that night the final tragedy was enacted with gunfire and men wounded and dead.

"But as the days and nights went by after the riot, the people of the camp refused to come out of their barracks to do any of the work necessary to a city of 10,000 people. No children came out to play, no lights burned at night. It was a dead city. Days went by and I could find no way to bring about the normal way of living, by which children played and went to school and everyone went about his daily routine of living.

"Two weeks after the riot I was sitting in my office listening to instructions over the long distance telephone, telling me to 'get tough,' when I looked up and saw Margaret Gleason standing near my desk. She had heard the conversation and she knew that I had no answer to the problem of restoring peace and harmony to the 10,000 people under my charge. She smiled at me and said, "What are you going to do now?" I told her that I did not know, but that I would not admit that to anyone but her. Then she said, "Ralph Merritt, have you forgotten your Christian upbringing, and have you forgotten that this is Christmas, and what Christmas means?" I was startled, and then she went on to say that there was a warehouse full of presents that had been shipped to Manzanar by the churches and friends who were interested in giving Christmas happiness to the more than 2,000 children who were behind our barbed wire fence. Then she unfolded her plan, which was that I should send trucks and men to cut trees and bring them back to camp; that they should be set up in front of each of the barracks, decorated with lights, and that the presents should be distributed the day before Christmas, so that the people could prepare Christmas trees for Christmas morning, and each child might have his gift. Then she reminded me that there

was at Manzanar a 'Children's Village' which was under her department. Here there were more than 90 orphans all the way from little babies to boys and girls fourteen years of age. They had been picked up by the Army all the way from Alaska to San Diego as 'security risks.' On Christmas Eve in the Children's Village she proposed that she and I arrange a great party for these children.

"Inspired by Margaret's enthusiasm and her belief that the spirit of Christmas would cure the tragedy of the riot, the plans were set in motion.

"On Christmas Eve, Margaret and Varina (Mrs. Merritt) and I walked through our dark, dead camp to the opposite corner of our mile square barbed wire enclosure where our Children's Village alone was lighted and where happy voices welcomed us.

"In the big hall we sat on the floor, Japanese fashion, surrounded by the excited and happy children while the Christmas scene of shepherds and wise men was enacted upon the little stage. Then there was a Santa Claus and presents and we began to sing Christmas carols. As we sang, I suddenly realized that, coming from somewhere, there was more singing than the voices of the little children gathered in that room. I got up and walked quietly out into the night. The clear moon and stars were shining over the Sierras. From out there in the darkness there came a great volume of the Christmas carols that were also being sung by the children inside. I climbed up on a box and looked out on the upturned faces of boys and girls of Japanese ancestry, born in America and American citizens, the product of our own schools, who were standing there in the night, joining with the children of the village in their Christmas carols. As they saw me they suddenly became quiet, wondering what this new Government representative would say and do. I called out to them that we would sing for the children inside, and led them in 'Oh, Come All Ye Faithful.'

"Soon Margaret and Varina joined me, and followed by hundreds of boys and girls and young people, we marched

through the camp, singing as we went. As they began the words of 'We Three Kings of the Orient Are,' I looked at the faces which were inherited from the Orient, but I knew that we were living again in the spirit of 'peace on earth and good will among men,' when Kings of the Orient worshipped the Christ Child.

"Lights came on throughout the camp, voices in Christmas greetings called out to us, and Manzanar came alive. When we came to the spot where the riot had occurred and where men had been killed and wounded we stood together, not in the spirit of anger but in the Christmas spirit which had re-created a new peace and good will for Manzanar. I called out to wish them all a Merry Christmas and they wished me and all of us a Merry Christmas. As their voices died out in the distance they were still singing the songs of Christmas.

"When Margaret and Varina and I stood alone watching the star that was over us, I turned to Margaret and said, 'Peace has come again to Manzanar'."

Thus from the tragedy of war emerged a classic little story of Christmas conceived in the life and mind of Ralph Palmer Merritt and given inspired expression in his lucid words. This incident best exemplifies the work and expression of the Merritt genius. And the Merritt adventure at Manzanar could well serve as a shining monument to the life and work of any man. In the case of Ralph Merritt, however, it was but an incident in a busy career that ranged from the cowboy days of his youth to the founding and financing of the giant Metropolitan Transit Authority which he managed through its initial adjustments without fuss or fanfare.

It is appropriate that at the time of his death he had gratuitously dedicated his energies and talents as a member of the board of the Kern Plateau Association to the cause of preserving for future generations the wild magic of the Kern Plateau, the last unspoiled primitive area of his beloved Sierra Nevada. Assuredly, had he lived out this last assignment, the

fruit of his labor would have been measurable success in the field of conservation.

In retrospect it is fair to observe that the active, multifaceted career of Ralph Merritt was often subjected to doubt and suspicion in the minds of antagonists and bystanders. But now that the final curtain has been drawn, those who worked with him and knew him well recall only his kindly and effective unsolicited help when the chips were down. Better yet, they are proudly aware of the living monuments he built out of the dreams of his great soul and the sinews of his frail body.

It is a most appropriate final gesture that this encampment, in the desert land which gave him strength and which he loved so dearly, serve as his memorial. Ansel Adams, famous photographer and conservationist, dedicated his beautiful book on the Manzanar project, 'Born Free and Equal,' to Merritt. The words he used could well be ours today. They read, "Dedicated with admiration and respect to Ralph Palmer Merritt who has given thousands of our fellow citizens a renewed faith and confidence in Democracy."

